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VIRGINIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SLAVERY AND SECESSION *

The author of this volume states in the preface that his design is to contribute to the information from which the future historian may write impartially the history of the War of Secession. He does not attempt to explain the causes that led the Cotton States to secede. True, he does briefly enumerate most, if not all, of the many and complex causes of the war. But he does not discuss them. Leaving to others the task of expounding the motives that led the other Southern States to secede, Mr. Munford limits himself to those actuating the citizens of his own State. And, even with respect to Virginia, he does not discuss all of them. But, practically ignoring all other questions, he confines himself to the solution of the following problems: Did Virginia secede because of a sordid determination to hold slaves and derive profit from their toil? Did Virginia secede because of wanton desire to destroy the Union? If not, what was the proximate cause of her secession?

In the first of the four parts into which the book is divided, Mr. Munford admits that among Virginians were men of widely divergent views, ultra-Secessionists and out-and-out Unionists, as well as men who asserted the right, while denying the expediency of secession; men who wished to make Virginia neutral territory between the warring sections, as well as men who wished to fight, indeed, for their rights, but within the Union and under the old flag; men who regarded slavery as a blessing for the blacks and essential to the safety of the whites, as well as men who considered it a curse for both races, and demanded its abolition. None of these elements, however, says the author, separately expressed the sentiments of the majority.

Only the returns from the ballot-box, the enactments of legislative and constitutional assemblies, and the utterances of the foremost leaders can be regarded as the true expression of the dominant element in Virginia; and Mr. Munford is led, by a con-

* *Virginia's Attitude Toward Slavery and Secession*, by Beverley B. Munford. New York: Longmans, Green & Company. 1909.

sideration of these returns, enactments, and utterances, to conclude not only that the majority of Virginians disliked slavery and hoped for its ultimate extinction, but also that they loved the Union and firmly clung to it until the government forcibly denied independence to the Cotton States and demanded of Virginia a body of troops to assist in their subjugation. Believing—as all Americans who seceded from Great Britain in 1776 believed—that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, Virginia sternly refused to take part in forcing upon sovereign States a government to which they did not consent, and sorrowfully, yet resolutely, took her stand “for the political and ethical principles which the flag symbolized, rather than for the flag itself.”

Part II, which is devoted to Virginia's attitude toward slavery is considerably the longest. Beginning with the colonial period, Mr. Munford points out that Virginia's repeated efforts to stop or restrict the importation of negroes, were vetoed by the King. He points out also that, even amid the storm and stress of the Revolution, her legislature found time, in 1778, to forbid and heavily penalize further importations, and quotes Professor Ballagh's statement that “Virginia thus had the honor of being the first political community in the civilized modern world to prohibit the pernicious traffic.” It was Virginia, too, that, after giving the Northwest Territory to the Union, confirmed the Ordinance of 1787 by which slavery was excluded from that vast domain. When the Constitution was framed, Virginia opposed, though in vain, the combined efforts of New England and the far South to secure the right to import Africans for twenty years longer. Among the early acts passed by the General Assembly of Virginia was one in 1782, authorizing slaveholders to emancipate their slaves either by deed or will, duly made and recorded, and another in 1788, making the crime of enslaving a child of free blacks punishable by death. Consequently, while there were less than 3,000 free negroes in Virginia at the close of the Revolution, the number increased to 13,000 in ten years, and reached 30,570 by the year 1810.

Here, says the author, “was a new problem”—the problem

of dealing with an ever-increasing number of freedmen of an inferior race, a problem so serious that the Legislature provided in 1806 that negroes freed thereafter must leave the State; just as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois at various times prohibited the immigration of negroes into their borders. In spite, however, of the difficulties thus put in the way of emancipation, Virginians continued steadily to free their slaves. It has often been charged that, when the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 increased the demand for negro slaves, and the congressional prohibition of their importation after 1808 cut off a large portion of the supply, the price of negroes rose so high that, yielding to cupidity, Virginians ceased to work for emancipation and began breeding slaves for sale to the cotton planters of the South. Mr. Munford demonstrates, however, that so far from the hostility to slavery subsiding in Virginia after the two events alluded to, it grew steadily stronger for many years afterwards. Speaking in the Legislature of 1832, Thomas Jefferson Randolph deplored the fact that Thomas Jefferson had not lived "to see a majority of the House of Delegates in favor of abolition in the abstract;" and Charles James Faulkner, in the same great debate, expressing his gratification that *no single avowed advocate of slavery* had risen in that hall, declared that the day had gone by "when such a voice could be listened to with patience or even forbearance." In this year, 1832, however (practically forty years after the invention of the cotton gin), came what the Rev. Dr. Philip Slaughter called the "flood tide of anti-slavery feeling, which had been gradually rising for more than a century in Virginia." Desperate efforts were made by the Legislature to find some practical mode of getting rid of the wolf which the State held by the ears. But, while individual Virginians liberated 100,000 slaves between the Revolution and the War of Secession and, in many cases, also paid the expenses of their colonization, no workable scheme was hit upon for eliminating slavery from the State.

And thus many Virginians settled down to make the best of a bad situation, while a few, goaded to anger by the ever-swelling torrent of abuse by Northern Abolitionists, actually persuaded themselves in time that slavery was a blessing. Yet in 1848 the

Virginia historian Howison declared that in general the people of Virginia regarded slavery as an "enormous evil," and that this sentiment had been gaining ground during many years. In 1851 Matthew F. Maury spoke of slavery as a "curse." Bishop Meade in 1854 declared that slavery had injured all the interests of Virginia, religious, political, and agricultural; and in 1856 Robert E. Lee declared that few persons in that enlightened age would fail to acknowledge that as an institution slavery was "a moral and political evil in any country," adding, however, that he thought it "a greater evil to the white than to the black race." The absurdity of the charge that Virginia went to war to preserve her property in human flesh becomes still more apparent when we learn that, of the 1,047,299 white inhabitants of Virginia in 1860, only 52,128 owned slaves. For, even if we multiply this latter figure by five, in order to include the families of slaveholders, it still remains true that for every Virginian with a pecuniary interest in slavery there were three or four others with no such interest whatever. Reflecting, moreover, that so long as Virginia remained in the Union, her slave property was largely protected and enhanced in value by the Federal Fugitive Slave Law; that her legal rights in the Territories were maintained by the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott Decision; and that Lincoln and the Republican party were pledged not to interfere with slavery in any Southern State; we should convict Virginians of sheer imbecility if we proved their motive for secession to have been the mere desire to protect their investments in negro property. For to leave the Union and go to war was to give up all the above-mentioned safeguards and to abandon in addition the protection of federal bayonets against the murderous raids of such fanatics as John Brown. "I believe," said John S. Carlisle in the Virginia Convention of 1861, that slavery is a social, political and religious blessing. . . . How long, if you were to dissolve this Union . . . would African slavery have a foothold in this portion of the land? I venture the assertion that it would not exist in Virginia five years after the separation; and nowhere in the Southern States twenty years after."

After pointing out, in the concluding portion of Part II, how

the Northern Abolitionists denounced the Constitution as "a covenant with Death and an agreement with Hell," and how vehemently they urged the dissolution of the Union, Mr. Munford goes on, in Part III, to ask whether Virginia, too, hated the Constitution and the Union, and therefore conspired to destroy them both. Passing in review the part played by the State in the Revolutionary and Constitution-making periods, he calls attention to the fact that it was Virginia who, when the Cotton States had already withdrawn from the Union, called together the celebrated Peace Convention at Washington, presided over by the venerable ex-President, John Tyler, and did all in her power to heal the sectional breach. On the same day that the Peace Convention met, February 4, 1861, an election was held in Virginia to choose delegates to a State Convention to discuss what action the State was to take. The result was overwhelming defeat for the Secessionists. "Thus be it always remembered," says Charles Francis Adams, "Virginia did not take its place in the secession movement because of the election of an anti-slavery President. It did not raise its hand against the National Government from mere love of any peculiar institution, or a wish to protect or perpetuate it. It refused to be precipitated into a civil convulsion; and its refusal was of vital moment. The ground of Virginia's final action was of wholly another nature, and of a nature far more creditable."

What, then, was this ground? That question is answered in Part IV of Mr. Munford's book.

When Lincoln declared his intention to employ the Federal power "to hold, occupy and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts," the Secessionists saw plainly that he intended to coerce the Confederate States, and rejoiced at the prospect of seeing Virginia driven into secession rather than be *particeps criminis* in the use of coercion. Yet the great Union-loving majority of the Virginia Convention still hoped against hope that Lincoln's words might be susceptible of some other interpretation. The burning eloquence of commissioners from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana could not move them to separate from the Union. As late as April 4, the Convention, by a vote of 104 to

31, expressed the hope that the Union might be preserved, and peace, prosperity, and fraternal feeling be restored. Yet the Convention declared, at the same time, in earnest, solemn tones, that Virginia would never consent to the use of Federal power, which was in part her own, for subjugating sovereign States. On April 13, three delegates appointed by the Convention appeared before Lincoln and requested him to state what his policy would be in regard to the Confederate States. But, in sending a fleet and army to reinforce Fort Sumter, Lincoln had already begun the war; and Jefferson Davis, not waiting for the pistol, cocked and pointed at his head, to be discharged, had fired his own. Fort Sumter was reduced; and Lincoln told the Virginia Committee that he held himself at liberty to repel what he termed the "unprovoked assault" upon Sumter, and to repossess it as well as other like places. The Committee made its report to the Convention on April 15; and on that same day came the news that Lincoln had ordered Virginia to furnish troops to help him conquer her Southern sisters.

Had Virginia hesitated at this supreme moment, she would have branded herself with inconsistency, cowardice, and infamy. Then indeed she might have been justly charged with putting her purse above her principles. But she did not hesitate. Tremulous with emotion, and with profound sorrow, yet promptly, and with iron resolution, her Convention on April 17 passed the Ordinance of Secession; and the people of the State ratified it by a vote of 128,884 against 32,134. Abraham Lincoln had forced her to choose between aiding and abetting the aggression of the strong, or suffering with the weak; and, to her eternal glory, she chose the right.

Such is a condensed statement of the view of Virginia's attitude toward slavery and secession elaborated by Mr. Munford, who, with the acumen of a lawyer and the equanimity of a judge, has set forth in detail the proofs of the conclusions indicated above. The materials upon which these conclusions are based are such as conform admirably to the canons of scientific research; copious quotations being given from original sources of all descriptions, including wills, deeds, unpublished letters, and the like. These materials are treated as the evidence of witnesses in court is treated; Mr. Munford alternately playing the part of counsel for the defense, counsel for the prosecution, and presiding judge. Nor can we doubt that his decision will

in the main be that of posterity. Here and there, probably, flaws may be discovered in the reasoning; or perhaps certain facts may not harmonize with some of the conclusions. We find, for example, in the petition of the people of Staunton praying the Convention of 1829-30 to abolish slavery, the statement that slavery was gaining ground in Virginia "with gigantic strides." How shall we reconcile this with the idea that at this very time Virginians were rapidly emancipating their slaves, and with Mr. Faulkner's assertion that no single member of the Legislature of 1832 avowed himself an advocate of slavery? The people of Staunton declared that slavery caused "waste and drain on the farm," and was "bringing poverty" upon all the inhabitants of Virginia. The representatives of counties as far apart as Fauquier and Rockbridge, Berkeley and Buckingham, are quoted as using similar language. How can such views be reconciled with the advance of slavery "with gigantic strides?" Were Virginians all fools? Did they all see the ruinous folly of slavery, and at the same time not merely cling to it but carry it forward with gigantic strides? The undersigned is of the opinion that the economically disastrous effects of slavery have been exaggerated by nearly all writers on the subject. If the statement of Dr. Henry Ruffner in 1847, that nearly 300,000 more people had emigrated from Virginia between 1790 and 1840 than from all the old free States combined, was a correct statement, it may be at least doubted whether the whole of this amazing exodus can be attributed to slavery solely. It is probable that the soil of Virginia was originally much less fertile than it is usually said to have been, and that not merely the exhaustion of some of it by tobacco-growing, coupled with ignorance of fertilizers and modern agricultural methods, but also the original poverty of much of the soil had a great deal to do with driving people from the State.

After all, however, little can be said except in praise of the book. It is not only scientifically sound and provided with a useful bibliography and index, but is also written in good, clear style, and in a tone wholly free from partisan or sectional bitterness. It is of absorbing interest, and should be read by every one, North and South, who cares for historical truth.

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